

THE ANCIENT FENIANS.

IN his epic of *Arthur*, Mr. Tennyson has succeeded with rare skill in revivifying a mass of ancestral legends, and rehabilitating them in the thought of the nineteenth century. Grim warriors of pre-historic times rise at his bidding from their slumber of centuries, seat themselves again at the Round Table, and give us the same old tales of knightly joust and tournament—the same recitals of marvellous adventures and chivalric deeds—which so long ago charmed the eager listeners to some garrulous minstrel in baronial halls.

To any one familiar with the legends which have thus become the basis of so grand a poem, there is an impressive difference between the rudimentary knights therein described, and those maturer characters pictured in the lines of our greatest living poet. While Mr. Tennyson has been faithful to the general outlines of those Arthurian romances, and has reproduced with an accuracy and research—only to be appreciated by studying the romances themselves—the most essential characteristics of their heroes, there has still been a wonderful transformation effected in the various personages as they have passed through the alembic of his modern imagination. They have a higher moral purpose, broader views of humanity, a keener sense of honor and justice, a truer conception of love and loyalty than belonged to that primitive age. Their coarser and more brutal features have disappeared, and they are presented to us sublimated, as it were, by the more advanced thought and culture of modern times.

Not less true, however, is the later poem to the spirit of the earlier legends. With a more masterly hand our poet has enlarged and perfected the ideal which those pioneers in our romantic literature attempted to portray. The model kingdom, in which men should be united as a common brotherhood loyally subject to a ruler pre-eminent in those noble qualities which insure obedience; the search after a spiritual perfection lost yet still attainable;—these ideas, disguised though they often seem by the pagan

and brutal sentiments prevalent in those turbulent times, were really the soul of those early Arthurian legends. The Quest for the San Greal, in which Arthur and his knights play so prominent a part, expresses the popular aspiration which Christianity had excited for perfection of life and government. That aspiration Mr. Tennyson presents to us intensified by the struggles of succeeding centuries. Taking the same ideas, the same general cast of scenery and plot, he carries forward the drama to its intended consummation;—brings out the original ideal in clearer outlines and fairer proportions. In the "Holy Grail" and "Idylls of the King" we may see the transformations which the Celtic spirit has undergone in its unconscious assimilation into the structure of English life. The semi-pagan Arthur appears glorified with the additional lustre which the English mind has since acquired. The former heroes of a province and a tribe emerge from their long obscurity with a breadth of conception and thought naturally produced by the union of Celt and Teuton into a people of world-wide dominion. Tennyson's Arthur inherits the parental virtues of both those great races of whose marriage English genius is the offspring. The poetical, dreamy, impetuous Celtic spirit is still there, but inseparably united with it are Saxon will and Norman culture and Christian sentiment.

In striking contrast with this revival of ancient Celtic legends in modern poetry, is the reappearance of kindred legends in modern politics. Two names could scarcely be mentioned more widely separated in our ordinary thought, and at the same time more closely connected by a common origin, than Arthurian and Fenian. The one—immortalized by our greatest poets—at once suggests knights of lion-hearted courage and maiden purity; chivalric deeds in defence of truth and right; and all the gorgeous pageantry with which imagination has enriched that famous order of the table round. The other!—what a mingling of the ridiculous and the reprehensible; what suggestions of impotent

bluster, vainglorious boasting, petty frauds, criminal conspiracies, and all the grandiloquence of speech and imbecility of action which have marked their abortive insurrections and invasions! No such difference, however, distinguished these names in ancient times. Finn is simply an older hero than Arthur, and the prowess of the Fenians was celebrated long before the knights of the round table became famous in song. Both names represent the early struggles and aspirations of the Celtic race; alike recall the time when that race was unconsciously preparing the foundations for the grand structure which English thought and blood are rearing throughout the globe.

During the first few centuries of the Christian era these Celtic people, who led the van in the march of Aryan civilization westward, saw themselves in danger of being rapidly absorbed or conquered by their stronger Latin and Teutonic brethren in the rear. Celtic Gaul and Hispania already had been brought so completely under Latin dominion that the customs, institutions, and race of the former rulers were almost entirely forgotten. In the British Isles the remnants of this once great people maintained the longest and most successful struggle for independence. There was their last fortress and sanctuary.

It was natural, during the varying fortunes of this protracted conflict, that the imagination should take those heroes whose real virtues most fully satisfied the popular wants, and, through poem and legend, should present them to us so magnified and glorified that they became also the embodiment of the prevailing ideas and hopes. Finn and Arthur were two such heroes,—personages both historical and mythical,—doing deeds great and grand enough to give foundation to those airy structures which the imagination of bards and romancers afterwards built upon them. In their biographies the fictitious does indeed exceed the real, and yet the fiction, no less than the fact, is a record of the spiritual life of the people among whom it arose. These old heroes, be they legendary or historical, give us an epitome of Celtic history; and the different significations of their names

in the past and present represent the fate which has befallen different portions of the Celtic race. While the fame of Arthur and his knights has been kept alive by many noted writers, and the legends concerning him have been assimilated so perfectly into English thought that he is no longer thought of as a Celtic hero, the memory of Finn and his ancient Fenians has passed so completely into oblivion that few have understood the real significance of the appellation as it makes its appearance once more in modern politics. Within the past few years, however, thanks to the patient researches of Celtic antiquarians and scholars, so many old Fenian legends have been exhumed from the dusty archives of European libraries, that we are able to obtain quite a vivid picture of the life of these ancient worthies. In this older literature we find Finn and the Fenians occupying a position among the Gael similar to that of Arthur and his knights among the Cymry. They exhibit the same courage, honor, patriotism—express, in fact, the same high popular aspirations.

The trustworthy facts thus far drawn from the tangle of history and legend in which their exploits have been preserved may be briefly stated.

In the early history of Scotland and Ireland, a tribe of Celtic warriors stand forth pre-eminent by their bold adventures and warlike deeds. The scenes of their exploits received names still perpetuated in the topography of both countries, and the exploits themselves became the theme of many poems and romances. Finn Mac Cumhail (pronounced Coole) was one of these warriors, and their most famous commander. According to Irish annals, he lived and died in the third century of the Christian era. So great was his renown that these Gaelic warriors, who had previously been designated by various names, barbarous to our English ears, were henceforth known as *Feinne*, *Fiana*, or *Fenians*; and as such were celebrated in the legendary history of Scotland and Ireland. They seem eventually to have constituted a kind of established militia, whose duty it was, in the words of an old historian, "to defend the country against foreign or domestic ene-

mies, to support the right and succession of their kings, and to be ready upon the shortest notice for any surprise or emergency of the state."

These meagre historical details give one little idea of the amount of Fenian literature which still exists in ancient Gaelic manuscripts. One of its most accurate and learned students has computed that, were all the Fenian poems and legends published, they would fill three thousand closely printed large quarto pages.

It is not our purpose in this article to attempt to separate the true from the fictitious in these legends, or to discuss the vexed question of their antiquity; although we think it can be shown that many of them are older than any other European nation possesses in its own tongue, and that legends, like words, may have, underlying their most obvious signification, the richest stores of information concerning the race. Keating, in his Irish history of the sixteenth century, says:—

"If it should be objected, that it is not to be supposed some particular transactions relating to O'Fionn and his Fiana, or Irish militia, can obtain belief, because some of the circumstances are impossible in fact, and therefore must be absolutely false, I confess indeed that the history of Ireland in some degree labors under the same misfortune with most of the old chronicles that were written in the times of idolatry and paganism, and there is scarce a country on earth, I suppose, whose primitive records are not disguised with fable and some incredible relations. . . .

But it is an unjustifiable consequence to conclude from hence that the old records and chronicles of all nations are fables and rhapsodies; as if antiquity were a sure and infallible mark of falsehood, and the ancients were a gang of cheats and impostors, who conspired together to transmit lies and to impose upon posterity."

Max Müller, in this age of historical criticism, has scarcely expressed more pointedly than this monk did three centuries ago the claim which popular legends have upon the student of a people's life. There is truth in fiction, could we only get at it; and in these

Fenian legends there is at least a trustworthy picture of the sentiments and culture of the people among whom they were produced. We propose at present, however, merely to present enough of their contents to show the contrast between the Fenian of the present and his earliest prototype.

Take, then, this picture of Finn himself, as given by his son Oisín,—the Scotch Ossian, so famous last century through Macpherson's forgeries,—and compare it with the ideal of a modern Fenian commander. The manuscript from which it is taken is certainly three centuries old, and there is good evidence that it was copied from much older writings.

"'Twas yesterday week
I last saw Finn;
Ne'er did I see
A braver man;
Teige's daughter's son,
A powerful king;
Both poet and chief.
Braver than kings,
Firm chief of the Feinn,
Lord of all lands,
Leviathan at sea;
As great on land,
Hawk of the air,
Foremost always.
Generous, just,
Despised a lie,
Of vigorous deeds,
First in song,
A righteous judge.
Firm his rule,
Polished his mein,
Who knew but victory.

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All men's trust,
Of noble mind,
Of ready deeds,
To women mild,
A giant he,
The field's delight.

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With miser's mind,
From none withheld;
Anything false
His lips ne'er spoke.
He never grudged,
No! never Finn.
The sun ne'er saw king
Who him excelled.

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A noble house
Was that of Feinn;
No grudge nor lust,

Babbling nor sham ;
 No man despised,
 Among the Feinn.
 The first himself,
 All else like him.
 Finn was our chief.
 Easy his praise,
 Noblest of kings.
 Finn ne'er refused
 To any man,
 Howe'er unknown ;
 Ne'er from his house
 Sent those who came.
 Good man was Finn,
 Good man was he,
 No gift e'er given
 Like his so free."

This poem, so curious as a specimen of early Celtic composition, is still more interesting for the ideal it unfolds of an ancient Celtic hero. The idea of a man who was thus both poet and chief, generous and just, despising lies, babblings, and shams, sharing his rank and greatness with all his followers, is certainly remarkable for a people so barbarous as the ancient Gaels are usually considered.

And the qualifications which he is said to have required in his followers are no less noteworthy. Fabulous as many of them doubtless are, the idea that a true soldier, in order to be worthy of his name, should have honor, courtesy, and learning, as well as bravery and strength, was real, and must have been operating to some extent among the people in order to have thus inspired their writers.

To enter the ancient Fenian order, "every soldier must swear that without regard to fortune he would choose a wife for her virtue, her courtesy, and her good manners ; that he would never offer violence to a woman ; that as far as he could he would relieve the poor ; and that he would not refuse to fight nine men of any other nation. Every soldier must be well acquainted with twelve books of poetry, and be able to compose verses. He must also run well, and defend himself when in flight. To try his activity, he was made to run through a wood, having a tree's breadth, and the whole of the Fenians pursuing him ; if he was overtaken or wounded in the wood he was refused, as too sluggish and unskillful to fight with honor among such valiant troops.

"He must be so swift and light of foot as not to break a rotten stick by standing on it ; able also to leap over a tree as high as his forehead, and to stoop under a tree that was lower than his knees. Without stopping or lessening his speed, he must be able to draw a thorn out of his foot. Finally, he must take an oath of fidelity."

These are some of the qualifications given to us by an ancient historian, who naïvely adds :—"So long as these forms of admission were exactly insisted upon, the militia of Ireland were an invincible defence to their country, and a terror to rebels at home and enemies abroad." What would become of our modern Fenians were such qualifications now required ?

In another poem of undoubted antiquity, distinguished for its alliteration and syllabic assonance—qualities which characterize more or less much of this ancient Celtic poetry,—Fergus, another of Finn's sons, is represented as mediating in a quarrel between his father, Finn, and another redoubtable warrior, Goll McMorma. The picture which he draws of this warrior corresponds with those already given of Fenian soldiers.

"I tell thee, Finn,
 His (Goll's) strength as waves
 In battle's crash ;
 Princely his gait,
 Comely his form,
 Goll's skill'd fence
 No play when roused.
 Ready to give,
 Dreadful his strength,
 Manly his mould,
 Soldierly great.
 Ne'er could I tell
 His grace and power.
 Like murmuring seas,
 Rushed to the fight,
 A lion bold,
 As great in deed.
 'Tis he that wounds
 The greatest foe.
 His purpose firm,
 A victor sure,
 Desires the fight.
 In history learn'd,
 Warrior bold,
 Sharp is his sword.
 Contemptuous Goll
 Plunders at will.
 A fearless man,

Wrathful is he,
Dreadful in look,
Leopard in fight,
Fierce as a hound.
Of women loved.
A circle true
E'er by him stood,
He's truly great.
Liberal, just,
Does not despise,
Yet firm resolves,
Gentle, yet brisk,
Forsakes no friend."

After thus soothing Goll's wounded pride by a recital of his many noble qualities, the poem closes with this appeal to Finn and Goll to renew their friendship :—

"Noble MacCumhail,
Sooth and promise,
Give peace to Goll,
Check wrath and guile.
During my day
Whate'er it be,
I'd give without guile
A third of the chase.
Let's strive no more,
Soft do thou speak,
Finn's love to Goll.
Goll, leave thy wrath,
With us have peace,
Now without grudge,
Have of Finn's forest a third."

And Goll is represented as answering :—

"That will I take,
Fergus, dear friend,
My wrath is gone,
No more I ask."

Cheap as such epithets may seem in poetical diction, they are valuable at least in showing the workings of Celtic imagination ; and there must be a truth underlying all this hyperbole and metaphor in that combination of bravery and learning, strength and courtesy, fierceness and gentleness, which we find characterizing these Fenians in so many poems and legends.

If, also, the character of a people can be judged at all from the position woman occupies in their literature, we may find still more striking illustrations of Fenian life in some legends and poems in which the other sex plays a prominent part. The following exhibits not only their respect for woman, but a unique style of courtship :—

The translator has abridged it somewhat, but has preserved as far as possible its original simplicity.

"One day Finn asked Cael,—a favorite warrior of his company,—whom he observed just returning from a journey, where he had come from. Cael answered that he had come from Brugh, in the north. 'And what was your business there?' said Finn. 'To speak to my nurse Muirn, the daughter of Derg,' said Cael. 'About what?' said Finn. 'Concerning Credé, the daughter of Cairbré, King of Kerry,' said Cael. 'Ah! do you know,' said Finn, 'that she is the greatest flirt among all the women of Erin; there is scarcely a precious gem in all Erin that she has not obtained as a token of love; and she has not yet accepted the hand of any of her admirers?'—'I know it,' said Cael; 'but do you know the condition upon which she would accept a husband?'—'I do,' said Finn; 'whoever is gifted enough in the art of poetry to write a poem descriptive of her mansion and its rich furniture will receive her hand.'—'Good,' said Cael; 'I have, with the aid of my nurse, composed such a poem, and, if you will accompany me, I intend to go to her court and present it.' Finn agreed to the proposal, and they started at once for the lady's court, which was at foot of the well-known mountains, the Paps of Anann, in Kerry. When they arrived the lady asked their business. Finn answered that Cael came to seek her hand in marriage. 'Has he a poem for me?' said she. 'I have,' said Cael; and he then recited a curious poem, of which these few extracts are a literal translation :—

"A journey I make on Friday;
And should I go, I shall be a true guest,
To Credé's mansion—not small the fatigue,
At the breast of the mountain on the north-east.

A bowl she has whence berry-juice flows,
By which she colors her eyebrows black.
She has clear vessels of fermenting ale;
Cups she has, and beautiful goblets.
The color of her house is the color of lime,
Within it are couches and green rushes;
Within it are silks and blue mantles;
Within it are red gold and crystal cups.
Of its sunny chamber the corner stones
Are all of silver, and of yellow gold;

Its thatch in stripes of faultless order
On wings of brown and crimson red.

Wounded men would sink in sleep,
Though ever so heavily burning with blood,
With the warblings of the fairy birds
From the eaves of her sunny chamber.

Its portico is thatched
With wings of birds, both blue and yellow;
Its lawn in front, and its well
Of crystal and of carmogal.

Here is a poem for her, no mean present,
It is not a hasty, rash composition.
To *Credé* now it is here presented,
May my journey be brightness to her."

The young lady, we are told, was delighted with the poem, and at once accepted the gifted author for a husband. Her dwelling doubtless lacked somewhat of the barbaric splendor with which it is here described; but the taste for gorgeous coloring, and the notion that the man of genius alone was worthy of all this material wealth, and a woman's love,—these were real possessions of those ancient Celts. What a picture also of society is this where maidens are won by poetry, and nurses assist in its composition! Nor are instances wanting of a chivalric spirit not inferior to that exhibited in the Arthurian legends. Here is one which we take from another poem:—

"Once we were a little band,
At *Essaroy*, of gentle streams;
Near the coast was under sail
A currach, in which sat a maid.
Fifty men stood by the king,
Brave in any fight or field;
Sad for them who faced their right arm,
For we ruled in every land.
All of us rose up in haste,
Save Finn of the *Feine* and *Gaul*,
To welcome the boat as it sped,
Cleaving the waves in its course.
It never ceased its onward way
Until it reached the wonted port.
Then, when it had touched the land,
The maid did from her seat arise,
Fairer than a sunbeam's sheen,
Of finest mould and gentlest mien.
Then before this stranger maid
We stood and showed courtesy:
'Come to the tent of Finn with us,'
With grace she all of us salutes;
'Twas *Cumhail's* son himself replied,
And salutes her in return.

Then did the king of noblest mien
Ask of the maid of fairest face,
'Whence is it thou hast come, fair maid?
Give us now in brief thy tale.'
'If thou be Finn, I ask defence,'
So now did speak the youthful maid,
'Thou of soft speech, and purest race,
Grant me protection; grant it now.'
Then spoke the wise and knowing king:
'Tell us now from whom thou flee'st?
Protection I thee grant, fair maid,
'Gainst every man that dares thee hurt.'"

The maiden relates her grievances; but in the midst of the recital her oppressor—"a hero of unequalled size"—appears, and endeavors to carry her away by force. After a long and fierce struggle, in which all the warriors except Finn are severely wounded, the ravisher is slain, and the maiden delivered. Such a plot may seem rather stale after it has been served up with every conceivable intellectual condiment for so many centuries, but it was fresher then, and it has a peculiar charm now, as an illustration of the spiritual culture of these Gaelic warriors. It is much for a people to have even in legendary literature their most renowned hero represented as "the generous friend of all distressed."

In another legend—and one of the most noted—we get a glimpse of Finn in his old age, where he appears in a light somewhat less heroic, but no less interesting for the revelation it makes of Fenian character and society. We give merely a brief outline of it.

"Finn, in his old age, asked the monarch *Cormac MacArt* for his daughter *Grainné*, in marriage. *Cormac* received the proposal with favor, and invited Finn to his palace at *Tara* to obtain the princess' consent, which was necessary in those days in *Erin*. Finn accepted the invitation, and took with him many of his warriors; his son *Oisin*, and *Diarmid*, one of his chief officers, a man of fine person and fascinating address. On their arrival a great feast was provided by the monarch for their entertainment.

"It was the custom at such feasts for the mistress of the mansion to fill her own cup with choicest liquor, and send it round by her favorite maid to the most distinguished guests. On this occasion *Grainné* did the honors of the table, and accordingly sent round her cup until

all had drunk from it except Oisín and Diarmid. Scarcely had they partaken of the liquor, and uttered their acknowledgments to the princess, than they all fell into a heavy sleep.

"When Grainné perceived the effect of the liquor, which she had purposely drugged, she went and sat by the side of Oisín and Diarmid, and, complaining of the folly of Finn, in expecting a maiden of her youth and accomplishments could ever consent to marry a worn-out old man, she offered to elope with Oisín; and when he refused to dishonor his father by such a proceeding, she implored Diarmid to save her from a fate worse than death by running off with her and making her his wife. After much persuasion Diarmid consented; the parties hastily fled from the palace, and succeeded in escaping to the open country.

"Finn and his companions, when they discovered the trick which had been played upon them, were, of course, greatly enraged, and started off immediately in hot pursuit. But Diarmid was such a favorite among the Fenians, and excited so much sympathy from the peculiar circumstances of the elopement, that the offenders succeeded in continually eluding their pursuers."

Did space permit, many other legends might be cited in confirmation of the statement, that, generations before Arthur, there is to be found among these ancient Fenians the same chivalric regard for women which afterwards characterized the romances of the Norman Trouvères. Scarcely inferior, indeed, in any respect to their more renowned compatriots of the round table, is the representation which these early poems and legends alike give of the noble qualities of this band of warriors. The coarse and brutal features of those barbarous times do sometimes mar the picture. We must remember that these men were either pagans, or just passing from paganism to Christianity. Numerous illustrations, in fact, might be given of the conflict between the old Fenian spirit and the monastic, as they are brought face to face. Two examples, however, which exhibit both their wit and bravery, will suffice. With a confusion of chronology common in poems which have

passed orally through so many generations, St. Patrick and Ossian are represented as holding the following dialogue:—

"Tell us, O Patrick, what honor is ours;
Do the Feine of Ireland in heaven now dwell?"

"In truth I can tell thee, thou Ossian of fame,
That no heaven has thy father, Oscar, or Gaul."

"For thy love's sake, Patrick, forsake not the heroes,
Unknown to heaven's king, bring thou in the Feinn."

"Though little room you'd like, not one of your race,
Unknown to heaven's king, shall get beneath his roof."

"How different MacCumhail, the Feinn's noble king,
All men, uninvited, might enter his great house."

"Sad is that, old man, and thy life's close so near,
That thou shouldst so unjustly judge of my great king."

"Better the fierce conflict of Finn and his Feinn,
Than thy holy Master and thyself together."

"By thy hand, Boissne's son, not empty are my words,
Better is one angel than Finn and the Feinn."

"Were my men in life I'd not hear thy howling,
And I'd make thee suffer in return for thy talk."

In a similar strain the Fenian poet and Christian monk discuss the merits of their respective faiths in another dialogue.

"Patrick.—Now is Finn the Whitehanded placed by God among the devils, and, although once great his strength to rely upon, he is weak now in the country of pains."

"Ossian.—My affliction and my grief I own; not that myself or Finn would have any regard for devils, however hideous."

"Patrick.—It is better for thee to be with me and the clergy, as thou art, than to be with Finn and the Fenians, for they are in hell without order of release."

"Oisín.—By thy book and its meaning, by thy crozier and by thy image, better were it for me to share their torments than to be among the clergy continually talking. . . . Woe is me that I am with the clergy of the bells! For a time I lived with Caeilte, and then we were not poor."

With the rise of monasticism the Fenian order passes into obscurity. Their memory, however, continued for some time to inspire the Gaelic poets, one of whom, calling himself by the name most renowned in their lit-

erature, with a pathos and despair characteristic of later Celtic poetry, thus laments their downfall :—

" Long are the clouds this night above me,
The last was a long night to me.
Each day that comes is long to me,
Such indeed was not my wont.
Now is no fight or battle-field,
No learning noble feats of arms ;
Without maiden, song, or harp ;
No studious learning any more ;
No hospitable heart, or board ;
No soft wooing, and no chase ;
In both of which I took delight.
Without the battle, march, or fight,
Alas ! how sorrowful life's close.

" Long are the clouds this night above me,
In this great world none is like me,
So sad, how sad my case !
A poor old man now dragging stones.
Long are the clouds this night above me,
The last man of the Feine am I,
The great Ossian, the son of Finn,
Listening to the sound of bells.
Long are the clouds this night above me."

Thus, amid the lamentations of their bards,

" The old order changeth, yielding place to new,"

and the Fenians pass from history and romance to reappear, after an interval of so many centuries, in modern politics. Why is it that in their resurrection they have lost so much of their ancient glory? Imagination is very apt to magnify the virtues of the past, and to lessen its failings ;—to look back to a golden age, and contrast it mournfully with

the poverty of the present ; but the difference between the ancient and modern Fenian is not due to the imagination alone.

There was once, if we can put any faith in historical evidence, among Irish patriots a literary taste, heroism, loyalty, which certainly do not characterize them in later years. Much of this apparent degeneracy undoubtedly may be attributed to the severe oppressions Ireland has suffered at the hands of her English rulers. She has been most unjustly and inhumanly treated. But much also must be attributed to what the French historian, Henri Martin, so felicitously styles—Celtic reaction against the despotism of fact. The modern Fenian is a type of that spirit. He remains willfully blind to the fact that it is not independence of race which Ireland needs, but incorporation into English life. The Teuton is the proper complement of the Celt, as the Celt is of the Teuton. Both gain strength by their union in one people. Saxon will and persistency, united to Celtic imagination and fire, have produced a people richer in commanding spiritual qualities than any the world has seen. Arthurian and Fenian are two words which present in miniature the two sides of Celtic history. In one we may behold the Celt passing harmoniously with other races into a larger and completer national life ; in the other, losing even his ancestral renown, through his obstinate struggles for an isolated independence, as impossible as it would be injurious.